

God's Waterloo

The Open and Shut Case for Non-Belief

Second Edition

By AmericanDreaming

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Preface

I don't know if a god exists, and neither do you. Wherever we might stand on this issue, we can't be one hundred percent positive. So how should we approach this question? We need only look to the other parts of our own lives. In every area of life outside of god, most reasonable people make decisions on the basis of *reason* and *evidence*. The god question should be examined with these very same tools. Whether or not god exists is a matter of supreme importance in the pursuit of life, and in the pursuit of *truth*. It is my objective, over the course of this book, to illustrate thoroughly that the evidence, the data, the reasons, the arguments, and the logic, point to one conclusion; that the existence of a god is extraordinarily unlikely.

My aim here is not primarily to go after religion. Religion served a vital purpose for ancient humans, providing them with legal, moral (add a thousand asterisks), and social codes in eras where technology, education, and civil infrastructure was not yet advanced enough to provide these. Religion functioned as training wheels, as scaffolding; a tool to aid us in getting started, but no longer needed. Religion is

just a symptom, and I intend to bypass it for the most part and address the root cause: the existence of god and religious faith. There have been many - far wiser and more learned than I - who have contributed to the pursuit of truth. I will draw from the intellectual wealth of my forerunners, along with some arguments, observations, and analysis of my own, to lay out a comprehensive yet succinct case against the existence of a god.

Preface to the Second Edition

When I wrote *God's Waterloo*, eight years ago, atheism was still fairly new to me. It was an intellectually exhilarating time in my life, having learned so much and been introduced to so many new ideas in such a short period of time. *God's Waterloo* was not written in hopes of publication, commercial or otherwise, though some sections were, for a time, posted on parts of the internet. No, I wrote these words for myself, feverishly over a three week period in the spring of 2009. This was a personal exploration, an outpouring of thoughts that had been culminating within me for years.

Looking back now, what first strikes me is how much I've progressed as a writer since I wrote *God's Waterloo*, but also how well this short book holds up. The fire inside that spurred me to fill the following pages has not extinguished, and its heat still lives in these words.

The original version of *God's Waterloo* was 90 pages, which included autobiographical content, as well as my thoughts on some aspects not directly related to the God question itself. These, and other non-essential sections have been cut out for length. What we're left with is as lean and honed a case for non-belief as I think I've ever seen in print. Christopher

Hitchens once said that everyone has a book in them, and that for most people, that's probably where it should stay. As for God's Waterloo, I had no choice. With the force of a xenomorph from "Alien," this burst from me; there was no keeping it in, but for nearly a decade it didn't get much further. I'm now convinced that God's Waterloo has *stayed* for quite long enough. Enjoy, and thanks for reading.

Sincerely,

AmericanDreaming,

New Jersey, May 2017

Chapter One:

Why People Believe in God

In evaluating the question of god's existence, we must first examine why it is that people believe. The following is a list known reasons and arguments for god's existence, ordered according to merit as I see it, going from least to most.

Indoctrination

This is the teaching of something (god in this case), which is to be accepted without question. This is a huge factor in explaining the pervasive and persistent nature of theism down the ages. Many atheists however often stereotype believers as a herd of brainwashed sheep, operating on little more than childhood programming and blind faith. This assessment is unfair, but the role that childhood indoctrination plays cannot be ignored or downplayed. In all likelihood, there are probably tens, perhaps even hundreds of millions of people on earth whose level of belief in god would be shifted toward the atheist end of the spectrum were it not for such efforts in early childhood.

Often times children are terrified into believing on pain of eternal torture; Hell. Aside from the obvious lack of evidence to support its existence, the very idea of Hell is,

excuse the phrase, diabolical. It is a powerfully manipulative (and sinister) strategy to tell children that if they don't believe X, they'll be burned and tortured by monsters for ever. Those of us with a sense of decency are mortified at the sexual abuse of children in various religions, but the abuse children's minds is, in the larger view, more damaging because of its near ubiquity.

The fact that people of faith feel the need to indoctrinate children is a revealing statement about their beliefs in and of itself. If their beliefs are the ultimate truth, wouldn't their children eventually find their way to the true path anyway, given the intellectual tools, access to information, and ability to decide for themselves? Behind theist's colossal projection of certainty, there stands a little man of doubt behind the curtains, hidden from view, but pulling the levers to keep up the facade. You owe it to yourself to have good reasons for believing what you believe, and if you don't, there's no reason to keep on believing it.

Wish-thinking

Many people, you may have noticed, have trouble differentiating what they *wish* to be true from what they *think* to be true. The failure to separate the two is known as

delusion. It is understandable, to look around the world... at all the chaos, the suffering, the seemingly arbitrary nature of everything, and have a deep yearning to make sense of things. People often say their faith is what gets them up in the morning, or what gets them through the day. We all want our loved ones to live on in a literal sense. We want to be able to meet them again some day. We want there to be an overarching purpose to our existence. We want evil to be redressed, and goodness rewarded. We want reassurance that all of the suffering is actually for the best. Wishing for something to be true, however, regardless of sincerity, does not *make it true*, or even more likely to be true. *Desire alone is not sufficient reason for believing something.* Reality doesn't care whether we find it appealing or not. If you are more concerned with what makes you feel good rather than what is *true*, we'll only be speaking past one another.

The "It's Faith" Argument

When challenged or questioned to justify their religious beliefs, some will respond along the lines of "my beliefs have nothing to do with science or evidence, that's why they call it 'faith.'"

Similar to wish-thinking, this argument also makes the

claim that god (and other supernatural beliefs) are completely outside the bounds of science, evidence, logic, and reason, so as to be untouchable. This is a cop-out. To justify belief in a being with insufficient evidence, by asserting that this being exists in another realm beyond the reach of all objective modes of inquiry is simply dishonest. It's also a tautology: make an irrational claim, then insist it's immune to rational scrutiny because as an irrational claim, it is by-definition irrational. Silly, self-justifying circularities, the likes of which would have made St. Anselm proud. In the face of insufficient evidence, making further baseless claims doesn't dig you out, it only digs you deeper.

The Circular Reasoning Argument

Question: How do you know god exists?

Answer: Because the Bible says so.

Question: How do you know the Bible is true?

Answer: Because god wrote it.

Repeat ad infinitum.

This line of reasoning would be laughable if it wasn't actually in use. I won't waste any more time on this.

The Argument from Beauty

This reasoning argues that there is so much beauty in the world, such as music, art, sunsets and so forth, that only a god could be responsible for such splendor. This is a very weak argument, one that should not survive a moment's reflection even by a child. The flip-side: if beauty serves as evidence of a god, wouldn't ugliness serve as counter points? George Carlin said it better:

"War, disease, death, destruction, hunger, filth, poverty, torture, crime, corruption, and the Ice Capades. Something is definitely wrong. This is not good work. If this is the best God can do, I am not impressed. Results like these do not belong on the resume of a Supreme Being. This is the kind of shit you'd expect from an office temp with a bad attitude. And just between you and me, in any decently-run universe, this guy would've been out on his all-powerful ass a long time ago."

The Ontological Argument

Another (and much older) tautology, the Ontological argument states that god, by definition, is the greatest thing there can possibly be. A thing that exists is better than a thing which doesn't. Therefore, god must exist. Checkmate!

This argument just plays around with the definitions we've assigned for abstract ideas, then proceeds to twist and contort them to find a linguistic loophole that god is supposed to fit into. A very similar argument is the Argument from Degree, which states that objects have various degrees of greatness, and that if an object has a lesser amount of greatness, some other object must exist that has the maximum amount of greatness. So, there must be an entity with the maximum amount of greatness, and that entity is god.

As you can see, attempting to prove god's existence using raw *a priori* logic alone doesn't work too well. It's very doubtful indeed that many people use this kind of reasoning to justify their belief, but the Ontological Argument and Argument from Degree are still taught in philosophy classes, so they were included here for completeness's sake.

Pascal's Wager

Founded by mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, this "wager" argues that we really can't know if a god exists, but that it's a safer bet to believe, because if there is no god, then it doesn't matter anyway, but there is and you didn't believe, you'll go to Hell. Although most people wouldn't recognize Pascal's Wager by name, its logic is widely in use. I

myself found this reasoning compelling, once upon a time. What it really is, is spineless agnosticism.

This wager doesn't even attempt to prove god's existence. It only argues that you have more to gain and less to lose by adopting theism as a sort of spiritual insurance policy. In that way, it's designed to be a win/win, but it's actually a lose/lose. If there isn't a god, then you wasted your time believing, but if god is real - and omniscient as commonly believed - he'll know that your faith wasn't sincere, but rather the product of bet-hedging, and you would surely be damned.

Argumentum Ad Populum

Also known as the Argument by Consensus, this is a fallacy which attempts to convince people into believing something, god in our case, by mentioning that everyone else does. At the time of writing (2009) well over ninety percent of the humanity believes in some form of higher power. From about a century ago, back as far as history can take us, this figure has probably been over ninety nine percent. I've heard people use this reasoning first hand, as you may have. The person of faith will say something like "if you don't believe in god, then do you think that 90% of the world is just insane, stupid, or delusional?" One need only look to history. There was a time

when virtually all humans thought the world was flat. There was a time when we all thought the Earth was the center of the universe. Consensus *alone* may make something socially acceptable, but it by no means makes it true. When one person holds an irrational belief, they call it delusion, when hundreds or thousands hold an irrational belief, they call it a cult, and when millions hold an irrational belief, they call it religion.

The God of the Gaps

This argument is used to take a gap in our current scientific knowledge, or a scenario in which the person arguing cannot conceive or imagine a non-supernatural explanation, and plug god into it. Several arguments fall under this more general banner such as the Argument from Ignorance. As humanity makes progress in knowledge and understanding, nearly everything which we previously attributed to the gods for lack of a better explanation has been explained via natural means. This includes disease, natural disasters, weather, the reproductive process, celestial bodies, the seasons, and so on. Looking at history, it becomes clear that this argument is being systematically whittled away by scientific progress. The god of the gaps argument has now been relegated to a small handful of issues.

A common example is the origin of life. Science does not

yet know how the first organisms went from non-living matter to living matter, and theists delight in this ignorance, because it creates a hole that they can fill with god. The problem stems from the fact that this argument supplies no *reason* why a god is needed to fill this gap and not something else. Why not invisible pink unicorns? Why not space aliens? Based on this reasoning, space aliens are as likely the source of the origin of life as is a god. This argument is fallacious because it can be used to (poorly) justify *anything*, and using it to attempt to justify one particular thing proves to be intellectually dishonest.

The Transcendental Argument (TAG)/ The Argument from Reason

Both of these arguments are along the same lines, so they will be addressed together. The Transcendental Argument for god's existence (or just TAG), argues that knowledge, logic, and morality could not exist in humanity except by god implanting them. The Argument from Reason argues that rational things must contain non-physical material along with physical material. If people can use reason, they must therefore have a rational source. Rationality cannot come from non-rational things, and so there must be an original rational thing to create us, and that thing is god.

Does your brain hurt yet? Don't worry, it's not because these are difficult concepts, it's because they make no sense. So where to begin? Both of these arguments take generous liberties with their presuppositions. They work under the assumption that humans could not have naturally developed reason and morality, which is forgivable, as these arguments were formed centuries before the discovery of evolution. We now know however, that evolution by natural selection is the process by which we acquired our big brains, which is the source both of our reasoning and our morality (I'll revisit this later).

The argument from reason also presupposes that "rational material" (such as consciousness) cannot come from non-rational material (physical matter of the brain), which is not backed up by any evidence, it's just speculation. We do not yet fully understand consciousness or its origins scientifically, and as ever, theists lose no time in plugging supernatural claims to fill the gaps in our knowledge. Both TAG and the Argument from Reason betray an ignorance of modern biology, and are built upon wildly speculative premises, and for those reasons should not be taken seriously.

Mind-Body Dichotomy

This is a combination of aspects from the Argument from

Reason and the God of the Gaps. Here we have yet another argument that capitalizes on the fact that science cannot yet fully explain consciousness, claiming that there must be a spiritual aspect to consciousness as well as a material one. This isn't strictly speaking an argument for god's existence, but is often tied in with them.

Briefly, it argues that we each possess something called a soul. A soul is supposed to be a spiritual part of a person that encapsulates their true essence. This soul is believed to be non-physical, and therefore impervious to physical harm and capable of surviving bodily death. A strong point against this claim can be found in cases of brain damage or degenerative brain diseases. When the brain is damaged, we often see changes - sometimes radical - to people's personalities, mannerisms, memory, skills, abilities, self-control, even morality in some cases. If the notion of one's *essence* is to mean anything at all, these attributes are what comprise it.

And yet the argument is made that beyond our physical meat-brain, there is an immaterial soul, like a backup of the mind in the ethereal cloud server. Except in computers, erased or corrupted data can be restored through clouds. One would think a god could at least manage that, right? George Carlin once joked that the universe produced humanity in order to obtain

plastic, which it could not make on its own. Perhaps then a god created humanity in order to get I.T. help?

If a person's true essence floats around them in an immaterial soul, not subject to harm in the physical world, then senility, brain trauma, or strokes should have no effect on an individual's personality. But they *do* affect a person's essence, and what that suggests is that consciousness begins and ends in the brain. Simply put, there is no evidence to support this argument, and there is no reason to suppose that there must be a supernatural explanation for consciousness.

The "God or Random Chance" Argument

I would find this argument amusing, if not for the fact that college-educated adults use it with straight faces. Similar to the God of the Gaps, this argument takes parts or all of the universe as we see it today, and asserts that only one of two statements can be true about it: either it was created by god, or it sprung into existence by random chance. This is usually framed around - you guessed it - areas of scientific ignorance. It's a false dichotomy, and an intellectually honest one which disregards all other possible explanations.

Science has shown us, time and time again, that complex things come about from simpler things, in long gradual

processes. Evolutionary biology has shown us the systematic means by which life has developed. Geology has shown us how the features of our planet have developed over time (such as the study of plate tectonics), and cosmology is mounting ever more evidence on the processes by which stars, planets, solar systems, and galaxies are created. All of these explanations require the laws of nature, and lots of time, not the supernatural. Whether you feel the need to believe that a divine hand guided these processes (and made sure not to leave any evidence of it) is up to you. But to believe that god made everything just the way we see it is flatly wrong, and to say that the only alternative is random chance is similarly incorrect. Everything we know suggests that phenomenon are almost always explained from the bottom up, from simplicity to complexity, not from the top down.

Personal Experience

Not to be confused with spiritual experience (which is further down the list), a personal experience argument for the existence of god is some kind of communication, sign, or contact the arguer believes they have received from a divine being. Examples would be hearing a heavenly voice, seeing an image in a seemingly random pattern, or coming face to face with some kind

of celestial being.

A brief overview of biology, neurology, and psychology, sheds much light on this. Humans are pattern seeking creatures. The propensity to find and identify patterns is hardwired into our brains, and it's one of the reasons we've become so successful as a species. This ability is not perfect, however, and the pattern recognition software in our brains can sometimes pick up false-positives. Walk over to your window and stare at the clouds. I promise you, the clouds are nothing more than water vapor, but within seconds, your brain will begin to detect shapes and faces from within the clouds.

A 2006 report describes a mentally healthy person being treated for epilepsy who underwent focal electrical stimulation in the left temporoparietal junction of the brain, which is the region that processes illusory perceptions. The result of this mental prodding was the sense that a "shadow person" was in the room, when no such person existed.¹ When the delicate balance in our brain is disrupted, it is capable of simulating stimuli that feel completely authentic, but are in fact illusions. We don't always perceive reality as it is, and understanding the mechanics behind this can help guide us to the truth.

In cases of hearing voices in one's head, most people would agree that some kind of professional help is in order, that is

of course unless it occurred millennia in the past, which apparently bestows it a legitimacy worthy of basing one's life around, but I digress.

Now in the cases of hearing a voice *outside* one's mind, or an encounter with the divine, or bearing witness to a sign, the most prudent and parsimonious course lies in what we know; to errors in pattern detection by the human brain, overactive imaginations, hallucinations, and the preexisting desire to see or hear certain things. Richard Dawkins writes in his book *The God Delusion*:

*"If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings."*²

Answered Prayers

Many people justify their belief in god by recounting a time that they prayed for something, and their prayers were answered. Perhaps they prayed for a loved one to recover from injury or illness, or saved from danger of some kind, and lo and behold, they were! Instances like these seem very convincing to the parties involved, and serve as confirmation to believers,

but there are several elements to consider.

First is the double standard being established here. When people pray for something and get it, they use that as proof that god exists, but when someone's prayers go unanswered, this is not accepted as a valid proof that there is no god. You either have to accept both, or neither (reason suggests neither). Picking the good and discarding the bad is dishonest. Some theists occasionally try to weasel out of this by insisting god answers every prayer, sometimes he just says "no." Cute, but there is no perceptible difference between a god that says no - in the form of doing nothing - and a god that doesn't exist. If the yes's count, so too must the no's.

In addition, the efficacy of intercessory prayer has actually been researched in several scientific studies. The most comprehensive of which was conducted in 2006 by Harvard medical school cardiologist Herbert Benson. The results show quite plainly that prayer has no effect whatsoever. 1,802 patients who were undergoing coronary bypass surgery were split into three groups. Two were prayed for by three church congregations, and one was not prayed for. Only half of the people receiving prayer were told that they were being prayed for. There was no statistical difference in recovery between groups, aside from the fact that the people who received prayer

and were told about it, saw an eight percent *increase* in post operation complications, most likely due to stress caused by knowing that they were being prayed for.³ Had this study demonstrated the efficacy of prayer, people of faith would have hailed it as the greatest discovery in recent memory. However, since it shows that prayer doesn't work, they simply say "oh, that doesn't prove anything, God doesn't work that way." So... god will let people die rather than reveal himself to those who most doubt him? The problem with this whole idea is that even if those who were prayed for recovered better, there is nothing miraculous about it.

The most important aspect of prayer to note, is the nature of answered prayers. No one who ever claims to have had a prayer answered, has had it answered in a definitively *miraculous* way. There are no documented cases of a supernatural occurrence resulting in someone's prayer being answered. As neuroscientist Sam Harris argued in his 2009 Newsweek debate with Pastor Rick Warren on god and religion:

"There are many things we believe that confirm our prejudices about the world, and we believe this only by noticing the confirmations, and not keeping track of the disconfirmations. You could prove to the satisfaction of every

*scientist that intercessory prayer works if you set up a simple experiment. Get a billion Christians to pray for a single amputee. Get them to pray that God regrow that missing limb. This happens to salamanders every day, presumably without prayer."*⁴

Of course no one, prayed for or not, has ever regrown a limb. Are we praying to a being that isn't there, or one that just favors salamanders over humans?

The Fine-Tuning Argument

The Fine-Tuning Argument examines how precise all of the fundamental physical constants are (i.e. gravitational force, nuclear force, etc). If any of these constants were even slightly different, the universe could not have formed in a way that would be hospitable to life. Therefore, this argument postulates that there must have been a grand "fine tuner," to play with the dials and get the constants just right, and that this fine tuner is god.

This argument is utilizing the God of the Gaps reasoning (you might have noticed the pattern). Science doesn't have a definitive answer to this mystery, but it has produced several possible explanations, such as the multiverse hypothesis. This

hypothesis supposes that our universe is not one of a kind, but rather part of a multiverse; a collection of multiple universes, possibly infinite in number. Each of these universes may have different fundamental physical constants, meaning most probably aren't conducive to life, but a few, such as ours, are.

The multiverse hypothesis may sound hard to swallow, but using god as the explanation is *always* much harder. The truth is that we just don't know why the constants are the way they are, and how they got that way. In cases like this, when there is so little data in, we have to be agnostics. There is no shame in admitting this. Gaps in knowledge should not be an excuse to say a god did it, instead they should serve as a challenge to work toward solving.

Spiritual Experience

Since as far back as history can take us, the spiritual or religious experience has been a persistent element of the human condition. A spiritual experience is when a person feels an overwhelming sense of oneness or transcendence with some kind of higher level of consciousness or reality. These experiences are real, and often have transformational effects on people. In fact I hope to one day experience something to this effect myself. Feelings of this sort, however, are almost exclusively

credited to be a divine presence, and wrongly so. The unfortunate fact is, as Sam Harris points out in his book *The End of Faith*, and again in *Waking Up*, that religion has had the monopoly on all things spiritual for so long that spirituality has become unnecessarily intermingled with theism.⁵ They need not be linked, and having a spiritual experience does not mean you are feeling god's presence.

The claim that spiritual experiences are divine in nature is most undermined by the wide variety of methods which can be used to have such an experience. For example, religious experiences have been reported during prayer, religious rituals, gazing upon an awe-inspiring sight (a breathtaking landscape, the Earth from space, your newborn child, etc), a near death experience, meditation, or taking various psychedelic drugs. The fact that you can have such experiences not only through religious activities but also by training the mind in meditation or taking psychotropic drugs, suggests that this phenomenon lies within the human brain, and not beyond it.

A case study published in 2000 describes spiritual experiences underwent by a drug rehab patient identified as "Eric." Eric had spent the previous year constantly using cocaine intravenously, and the only interruptions in his binges were cocaine-induced psychoses that struck him with fear and

paranoia. He had a long history with substance abuse, a failed marriage, and a dead-end career.

He was doing the Twelve-step program to recovering, and this approach requires the person to surrender to a "higher power." Eric was an atheist, and was told to simply pretend. In time, however, the rehab showed positive results and his life was changing for the better. He found that his belief in god was no longer feigned, but genuine. The occurrence that sealed the deal was when a woman he was seeing ended their relationship, and in despair, he felt like giving up on himself and turning to drugs. Just then, his whole body was filled with an overwhelming presence, and a voice (which he interpreted to be god's), told him that everything is going to be alright. The voice said "Look at yourself, Eric. You are exactly where you are supposed to be, and you are doing exactly what you are supposed to be doing. Look at how far you have come. I am very proud of you. I love you. Keep up the good work." From that day on, he was a changed person.⁶

Fortunately, everything seems to have worked out for Eric, but this case study reveals aspects of spiritual experiences that need to be discussed. What really happened to Eric? Was he touched by god, or was it all in his head? Let's consider the facts. First of all, we know he was a recovering from a

near-lethal drug addiction, and we know that this can have serious effects on the brain. Secondly, we know that he was living a very broken life and was in a state of emotional fragility. Third, we know he started believing in god because of the progress of the Twelve-step program. And lastly, we know that he was in a state of mental anguish when he had the experience. Everything about this case points to the conclusion that this religious experience was a coping mechanism in his mind. Eric had this experience because he *needed* to. Take any documented case of a spiritual experience, dig a little deeper, apply the principle of parsimony, and the answers can reliably be found within the human brain.

We still have a long way to go in understanding the intricate inner workings of the brain, but significant gains have been made, both in our general knowledge about the brain, and its correlation to spiritual experiences. All of the data points to this being an experience that anyone can have, simply by pressing the right buttons in your brain. This is not to diminish the reality of these experiences, nor the profound significance they can have in people's lives. It is felt by many that something beautiful and deep is lost, the more completely a thing becomes understood scientifically. I could not disagree more. The great theoretical physicist Richard

Feynman said it better than I:

"Poets say science takes away from the beauty of the stars – mere globs of gas atoms. Nothing is "mere." I too can see the stars on a desert night, and feel them. But do I see less or more? The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination – stuck on this carousel my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern – of which I am a part... What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the why? It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it. For far more marvelous is the truth than any artists of the past imagined! Why do the poets of the present not speak of it? What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?"⁷

There will always be so much we don't understand, don't push away what little knowledge is within our grasp.

The Teleological Argument or Argument from Design

One of the most prevalent arguments for a god, this contends that the universe seems designed due to its immensity, complexity, and apparently ordered and purposeful nature. Design necessitates a designer, and therefore that designer must

be god.

The logic that props this argument up is *"if something looks designed, there must be a designer."* On the face of it, it makes sense. When you see a painting, you know there was a painter, a watch, a watchmaker, and so on. Charles Darwin's discovery of evolution, however, deals this logic a fatal blow. Evolution shows us that we can indeed get things of such beauty and complexity such as wings, eyes, brains, and sea shells - things that almost demand a designer for an explanation - without one. To clarify, evolution does not explain how life arose, nor does it explain how the universe began, but it obliterates the notion that something which looks designed must have a designer, which in turn obliterates the foundation that this argument is built on.

Perhaps our first encounter with this argument was during childhood, and those of us who were contrarians might have asked "then who designed god?" We were usually told, with patronizing dismissal, "no one made god, he's just always been there." We were right to ask that question, and it's one we should continue to ask. Postulating that god is eternal alleviates the "who designed the designer" retort that even a child can come up with, but it requires the believer to plunge further down the rabbit hole of faith, straying ever farther from the light of

reason and evidence. While the argument from design may have an initial allure, when dissected, it crumbles just like the rest.

The Cosmological Argument

Also known as the Unmoved Mover and the Uncaused Cause, this argument maintains that everything has a cause. When we trace back the causes to the beginning of the universe, to avoid an infinite regress, there must be some kind of uncaused cause which started everything off, and that prime mover we call god.

So we have this dilemma. We know that everything has a cause, and to find out how everything began two options seem to jump out at us. Either there's a never ending series of causes, or there is an original cause that is eternal in that it was never started. The infinite regress is widely rejected by theists and atheists alike, so let's set that aside. As for the prime cause, does it have to be a god? Here is where Occam's razor can be of great use to us. This principle states that all things being equal, the simpler, more parsimonious explanation - the one which requires the fewest assumptions - tends to be better. An amusing and useful depiction has been floating around the internet. I've slightly paraphrased it:

Before Occam's Razor

God created the universe and God has always existed.

After Occam's Razor

~~God created the universe and God has always existed.~~

*Occam's Razor: It slices! It dices! It eliminates
superfluous supernatural entities!*

This little blurb expresses the brilliance of Occam's razor in just a few short sentences. If we are to contend that something had to exist which was not brought into existence, then positing the universe having always existed is vastly more explanatory and plausible than a god having always existed. For an intelligence such as god to create the universe, god would have to be, at the very least, significantly more complex and improbable than the universe itself. Not to be overlooked is also the fact that we know the universe exists, and we do not know if a god does. So postulating the universe as being eternal fits better within Occam's razor, and is the more scientifically and logically elegant explanation. As of now, there is no evidence to prove that the uncaused cause is god or the universe, but reason and logic point us, as always, away from god.

In addition, recent developments in theoretical physics have laid much of the groundwork in demonstrating that the universe may have in fact come from nothing. The age-old refrain from theists that "something can't come from nothing," may prove false in the final analysis. Physicists have come to understand that the laws of nature, as we understand them, do not fully hold at the quantum level (on scales smaller than single atoms). Particles have been observed spontaneously going out of or into existence, and being in multiple places simultaneously. To our macro-level intuitions, this sounds impossible, and yet, the evidence is there. How does this impact the Cosmological Argument? Well, we now know that on the quantum level, causality becomes fuzzy; that something can come from nothing. The Big Bang Theory states that the universe expanded out of a single, infinitesimal point; a point smaller than the size of an atom. Put these two concepts together, and the plausibility of the universe having come from nothing is very nearly established. This doesn't demonstrate that the universe came from nothing, but it shows that it's *possible*. The gaps just keep getting smaller and smaller, don't they?

It's also important keep in mind that these arguments for god's existence are used almost exclusively by *theists*, arguing

for the existence not just of a god, but *their* particular god (rather than deists, who believe in an abstract, impersonal deity). Not a single one of these arguments makes any mention whatsoever to any one god. Although the fallaciousness of these arguments has been shown, even if any of them is to be granted credence, they still cannot be used to prove the existence of any *specific* god.

Chapter Two:

Distractions and Digressions

When discussing religion, god, and faith, the arguments boil down to two categories. Truth: is a belief *true*? And Utility: is a belief *good*? Recognizing this distinction is of paramount importance. This chapter is devoted to the various attacks on non-belief, all of which happen to fall under the "utility" category. It is crucial to keep this in mind, because at bottom, they have no bearing whatsoever on the *truth* of whether a god exists. I will repeat this over and over throughout this chapter, at risk of sounding heavy-handed, because these charges against atheism are nothing more than distractions and digressions from the pursuit of truth.

Science Requires Faith

The burden of proof is on the person selling something, not the person who doesn't buy it. For this reason, the weight of this burden will soon drag down a theist in debate. When backed into a corner, as defense mechanism, they'll try to pull the non-believer down with them by declaring that "science requires faith just like theism [or religion]." People will sometimes also say "you sound just as fundamentalist as those you oppose,"

which is ultimately another way of equating atheism/science with theism. Atheism and science often become intermingled in any kind of atheism versus theism contest, but it's important to bear in mind that not everyone with a scientific worldview is an atheist, though most atheists do have a scientific worldview.

This tactic of proclaiming that science requires faith is an act of desperation. When the theist cannot mount any viable path forward with evidence or reason, their only available option is to try to discredit the non-believer in hopes that the argument will appear as a wash. What makes this claim so dishonest is that it's flatly wrong. The very foundation of science is *evidence* and *skepticism*, while the definition of faith is belief *without* evidence. When a new hypothesis comes about, it is greeted with rigorous scrutiny by the scientific community. Only if it holds up, does it become accepted, and if new evidence should surface which unequivocally overturns it, it will be discarded. I don't believe in evolution, I *accept* it. No one accepts evolution or the Big Bang Theory because of faith. The evidence and data speak for themselves, and so we accept them as facts. Most importantly, this attack has nothing to do with the truth of the god question. This charge does not argue that theism is true. It's a distraction and digression.

The Meaning of Life

What is the meaning of life? Perhaps it's an incorrect question to ask, like asking what the color of hunger is, or Stephen Hawking's example, like asking directions to the edge of the Earth. To whatever degree this question does make sense, there is no confirmed answer to it on the cosmic scale. The problem is that theists claim to know, whereas atheists don't. This leads to believers attacking non-belief as being a cold, depressing, and hopeless.

Our big brains are the secret to our success and dominance on Earth, but they are a double-edged sword. The over-abundant human curiosity has fueled our progress over the ages, but it also instills in us this strong sense of uneasiness when there comes a question to which we can't answer. In such instances we tend to favor bad explanations over no explanation. For thousands of generations, we didn't know how people got sick, so we believed that they were being inhabited by evil spirits, because that was the only explanation available. For thousands of generations, we looked up at the night sky without a clue as to what those gleaming specs were, so we believed that they were gods, because that was the only explanation available. Similarly, people gravitate toward believing that the meaning of life is what a specific religion might say, because that is the

only explanation at hand. In the 21st century, this is not acceptable reasoning with which to adopt a belief, especially one this consequential to one's life.

Many are averse to the notion of a purposeless universe. Journalist Christopher Hitchens' image of god as a "celestial dictator" or a "celestial North Korea," portrays god as a divine strongman; an omnipotent, omniscient authoritarian who sets up the circumstances for your every move, invades your privacy, and can even convict you of thought crime. This casts the grand purpose concept in a new light, one far more sinister and Orwellian. Upon reflection, very little indeed separates a divine power guiding everything from a dictator in the sky. I can find no fundamental difference between the idea of God the father, and Orwell's Big Brother.

However, this entire argument is of no help in lending credibility to god's existence. The contention that atheism is depressing while theism is uplifting, is arguably false, but undeniably *irrelevant*.

Atheism = Genocide

One of the most regularly used attacks on atheism is the citation of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, their rejection of traditional theism, and all of the death and

destruction that they caused. These include but are not limited to the governments of Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, and Hitler (who appears not to have been an atheist, but let's play along). This charge is regurgitated with the frequency and compulsion befitting Tourette's syndrome.

The problem with these regimes wasn't their atheism, it was the fact that they were made into political religions, where questioning the leader was a crime, and rational and skeptical inquiry could get you imprisoned or even killed. These governments were not paragons of reason, they were every bit as irrational and dogmatic as religions, they merely swapped out a supernatural entity for their leader. People sometimes say atheism is a religion, which is simply incorrect. Atheism is no more a religion than bald is a hair color, or abstinence a sex position. Atheism is merely the lack of belief in a god or gods. When you take atheism, and combine it with nationalism, tribalism, pseudoscience, and undemocratic political dictatorships, then you get the regimes of the 20th century. "How convenient," believers might say, "that when people are religious, their crimes are blamed on religion, but when they're atheists, their crimes are *still* blamed on religion." The problem, ultimately, is dogma; sets of ideas held on faith, and not to be questioned. Religion is one form,

but dogmatisms and even full blown religions do not require a god, as we see even now in North Korea with their "state ideology" Juche.

Dogmas can be used to commit unthinkable atrocities, and similarly, without a religion or dogma, you'll find the justification for committing atrocities all but disappears, both for believers and non-believers. There is no logical connection between genocide and atheism, or genocide and deism for that matter. Deists believe in a god, atheists don't, but they both don't believe in religion. Can atheists do bad things? *Of course.* But it is nearly impossible to do bad things *solely* because of non-belief in god. When you can get nineteen, middle class, college-educated men to fly planes into buildings based directly on their disbelief in the existence of god, or their confidence in the scientific method, then I'll stand corrected.

Believers also use these regimes as an example of what happens when atheists take control of a society, citing them as the only examples of godless countries "and look how they turned out!" They seem to have willfully ignored modern day countries such as those of Scandinavia. These countries enjoy a much higher standard of living as compared to America, as defined by average salary, life expectancy, infant mortality, education, individual liberty, and aid to the third world.⁸ These countries

do so without imposing atheism on anyone.

Once again, this is an argument which only functions within the bounds of the "utility" category. This argument has no relevance to whether or not theism is true.

Morality

The most frequent and serious distraction and digression is the morality argument. Theists argue that without god, there can be no ultimate morality, no objective right or wrong, only what we make up. Some go as far as to argue that without god, there can be no morality at all.

Let me address the latter first. If you couldn't be moral without god, we would see non-believers committing a disproportionately high amount of crime as opposed to theists, which of course we don't see. The vast majority of atheists are just as moral and law abiding as their faithful neighbors, if not more. That claim simply isn't borne out in crime statistics or prison demographics.

Now to tackle the broader issue, of the supposed necessity for a god to implant us with morality, and to be the ultimate guide of what is right and wrong. I first want to separate two different levels of morality; what I'll call *basic morality*, and *higher morality*. By higher morality, I mean the aspects of our

morality that require more sophisticated and complex cognitive abilities, social and self-awareness, and logic, as compared to non-human animals (specifically mammals). Evolution shows us that we come from the animal kingdom, and that we're a part of it. Take chimpanzees, our closest living genetic cousins. Our lineage and theirs split about six million years ago, and we're about ninety six percent genetically identical to them.⁹ Over decades of research, scientists have documented and studied the behavior of chimps, and we can see that they possess a sense of morality. They form strong family and kinship bonds. They exhibit reciprocal altruism ("you scratch my back I'll scratch yours"), leadership, generosity, a willingness for teamwork, sympathy, justice, and even a sort of empathy. Chimpanzees will refuse to share food with a member of the group who doesn't share themselves. Chimps also have an impulse to console their fellows by hugging them when they have been defeated in a skirmish.¹⁰ This is a good example of basic morality. This basic morality is hardwired into their brains via evolution by natural selection. Why? Because these traits give them a clear Darwinian advantage. Individuals can become more productive if they work together and can get along in groups. We see similar styles of basic morality all throughout the spectrum of life on Earth, specifically in mammals, due to large brain size and high

social nature.

The link bridging the gap from the basic morality of our primate cousins to our higher morality, is our big brains. Intelligence proved an advantageous trait for our ancestors, and as intelligence gradually increased, moral intuitions became more sophisticated. With big brains also comes the ability to *reason*. Reasoning, as well as the other benefits of human intelligence, combined with the moral intuitions ingrained into us as social mammals led to our current higher morality. Why don't most of us don't go on killing sprees just for the fun of it? Because the propensity to be at least minimally pleasant towards others is hardwired into us, and because our brains allow us to reason that such behavior will likely end poorly for us, and that a society where such acts were common would be undesirable. It is our large brains which grant us reason, and it is reason combined with our ingrained instincts and intuition which grants us the ability to feel sympathy, empathy, pity, magnanimity, generosity, and so forth, on a level we would not otherwise be able to. This is why we give money to those in need, why we feel the urge to console someone crying, or volunteer our time to help perfect strangers. Evolution gave us our moral tools, and education teaches us how to use them properly. There is absolutely nothing to suggest that anything

supernatural need be involved at any stage.

The last aspect of this argument is good and evil. Theists argue that objective good and evil cannot exist without a higher authority mandating it from the heavens. That may technically be true, however this concept is fatally flawed. If morality were dependent on the dictates of an authority, then that authority could change their mind at any time and completely uproot the system of ethics. In that respect, it would not be objective, but subjective to the authority's whims.

Furthermore, this idea divorces the act of *moral reasoning* from morality. Morality, under this Divine Command Theory, is not about understanding the implications of our actions and how they affect others, it's merely following orders. That isn't morality, it's obedience, it's seeking reward and avoiding punishment as though we were dogs. I don't mean to insult anyone's pet, but I'd like to think we humans are capable of something a little deeper than this.

The fact is, certain behaviors that were commonplace a thousand years ago would be considered horrible today, and certain aspects of modern morality will, in future generations, be considered immoral. This is not to advocate moral relativism - the belief that what is good or evil is completely relative to the context of history, culture, and society. No, looking at

history, we can see clear progress being made on the morality front, moving in a singular direction. With the faculty of reason, comes a sense that some things are simply wrong (in most if not all situations). Things like murder, rape, oppression, or slavery. In this sense, the capacity to reason can establish a provisional semi-objective morality, but with an asterisk denoting extenuating circumstances. What we need is the nuance to adapt to new information and understanding, without pretending we know nothing about human well-being and flourishing.

The insistence that a moral law giver is needed for morality is also belied by the fact that few believers seem to get their ethics from their law givers. If theists truly got their morality from their holy books, then Christians and Jews would murder their children for talking back to them, or stone their neighbors for working on the sabbath. Their brains, with the power to reason, recognize that this behavior is immoral (or at the very least imprudent and socially awkward), and so they do theological gymnastics to interpret these obsolete morals out of their sacred texts. Our "good books" don't dictate what is good, it is, and has long been *us* deciding what is good *in* our good books. I join ex-Muslim author Ali Rizvi in urging you to *cut out the middleman*.

The Arrogance of Atheism?

The universe is about 13,730,000,000 years old.¹³ The universe has about 70,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (70 sextillion) stars in it.¹⁴ The universe is about 93,000,000,000 light years from end to end.¹⁵ This means that traveling at the speed of light (671,000,000 mph), the universal speed limit, it would take 93 billion years to traverse the universe end to end. To be a theist is to believe that all of this was designed, not only with us in mind, but *specifically* for us. I cannot think of a belief more overtly arrogant than this.

Ironically, in a feat of stunning projection, atheists are often accused of being arrogant, yet theism is saturated with anthropocentric conceit, cosmic self-importance, and delusions of grandeur. Belief in a personal god is irreconcilable with the admission that we do not play the lead role in this cosmic production (or at its most interpretive, at least as part of an ensemble of other intelligent beings in the universe). There is nothing humble about faith. Carl Sagan put it more eloquently than I, in his deeply humbling book *Pale Blue Dot*:

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's

us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar', every 'supreme leader', every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to

*save us from ourselves."*¹⁵

The attacks against atheism that this chapter discusses are political tactics used by theists to demean atheism in hopes of deflecting from the indefensibility of their own truth claims. No amount of mud slinging can conjure a fictional being into existence. These are nothing more than distractions and digressions from the pursuit of truth.

Chapter Three:

The Divine Paradox

We have addressed the reasons and arguments for god's existence, as well as common attacks on atheism. This chapter will be examining the paradoxes that exist within the very concept of god as we have come to know it in the West. This god is believed to be omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnibenevolent (all-loving), omnipresent (everywhere at once), and eternal/atemporal (infinitely old or existing outside of time). These abilities create a series of contradictions that all but prove the logical impossibility of this god's existence.

The Problem of Evil

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

- Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.)

It is difficult to expound on Epicurus' words without being redundant, but permit me this attempt. Religious apologists and theologians have struggled with the problem of evil; that is, how the sort of god they believe in could create and/or allow evil in the world. Over the ages they have managed to produce a short list of defenses.

Some Christian apologists claim that evil exists because of the "fall of man," which refers to the story in Genesis where Eve eats from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. They say that this "Original Sin" created the "fallen paradise" we live in today. Inconveniently, modern genetics has disproven the notion that humanity began from two progenitors. Whoops, there goes the entire foundation for the world's largest religion. Even setting that aside, this claim makes very little internal sense, even if one believes the Bible is true. The "sin" Eve and Adam committed was *prior* to their acquisition of a moral sense. It is therefore irrational to assess moral responsibility for such an act, much less punish it (and extend that punishment to every subsequent generation of every species).

Another rationalization put forth is that evil is simply the absence of god/goodness. This argument likens god and goodness to light, and evil to darkness. Light doesn't create

darkness, darkness is just the absence of light. Sounds mildly clever, until you remember that this god is omnipresent. Evil can't be defined as the absence of god, if god is everywhere, penetrating all things.

Perhaps the easiest and most convenient argument to throw up, is that god works in mysterious ways, and we can't comprehend his motives. Chapter five is entirely devoted to this concept, so let's postpone that for now.

The yin and yang argument tries to alleviate our problem by reasoning that good and evil are relative to one another, and require one another to exist. This argument seems to contradict most of theistic moral thinking, which is largely absolutist and anti-relativist, but let's just ignore that for the moment. The argument is that good is only really *good* as we understand it, because we have evil with which to compare it to. Therefore, without evil, good would be, relative to our range of possible experience, simply neutral. An argument not wholly without merit.

Given this, god *had*(?) to make evil so that we could also have good. At first glance, this may stop you in your tracks, but think about it for a moment. If we got rid of all the hatred in the world, all the cruelty, the spite, sadism, etc, it wouldn't actually change love, or goodness, or kindness. Love

wouldn't just vanish, resulting in a world of impersonal, emotionless zombies. Our *perception* of love would change, but love would remain. Without evil, there would still be good, we would just perceive it differently.

The most prominent explanation for the existence of evil is the argument from free will. This argues that god didn't create evil, he created humans and let them have free will, and with this free will, they created evil. I believe there is mounting evidence and compelling arguments that we don't in fact have free will, at least as commonly understood, but that's another subject for another time. Even if we accept the existence of free will, how could god have bestowed this upon us if he himself has none?

The Paradox of Omniscience

God is also attributed the power of being all-knowing. This means that god not only knows everything that there is, but everything that ever was and will be. If he can see into the future, then he knows everything he himself will ever do. This means that god is bound by the shackles of his own destiny, unable to change his mind without negating his omniscience. If god is all-knowing, he cannot have free will, and if he doesn't have free will, he could not have imparted it to humanity, "made

in his image" as we purportedly are.

The Omnipotence Paradox

God is also supposed to be all-powerful, but the idea of omnipotence itself is contradictory. At some point in our lives, we've heard someone ask "can god create a rock that's so heavy he can't move it?" If he can't, then there's something he cannot move - he's not omnipotent. If he can, then there's something he can't create - he's not omnipotent. It's a lose/lose situation. A similar paradox pertaining to god's eternal nature would be "could god end his own existence?" God cannot be omnipotent, because the ability of omnipotence is not logically possible.

Some are quick to dismiss this paradox, presumably on the grounds that because it's so easy to come up with, it must be childish in some way, and therefore self-evidently fallacious. Others argue that this is a misunderstanding of what is meant by "omnipotence." They posit that god's all-powerfulness excludes things that are logically impossible or contradictory. How could they know? The claim that god is omnipotent seems to be fabricated out of whole cloth to begin with, so it makes no sense to continually propose additional unjustifiable assertions to solve all every problems. Speaking of childishness, this is

what children do when battling each other using imaginary weapons and powers.

"No, your ice ray can't hurt me, because my energy staff also creates a fire shield that melts all the ice!"

God is simply credited with too many all-encompassing powers, and these powers cannot logically coexist. To be clear, these paradoxes do not relate the the general idea of the a higher power, but rather the concept of god as defined in the Abrahamic religions. It doesn't bode well for the existence of a deity, when the most widely worshiped god in human history is practically disproved just by his very definition. The only way, it would seem, to get rid of these problems, involves some very creative theological gymnastics, along with maxing out your credit card of unfounded supernatural claims.

Chapter Four:

Why God's Existence Is So Unlikely

All of the content discussed up to this point should constitute reasonable grounds for disbelief. However, there are some arguments in the affirmative for the non-belief in god, and this chapter is devoted to them.

Evidence

The first and foremost reason that anyone has ever doubted that there is a god, is because of the *lack of evidence*. We can't see god, we can't hear god, we can't taste god, smell god, or touch god, and no miracles or clues of divine nature have ever been scientifically proven. Believers can offer up the "it's faith" argument, as mentioned in chapter one, but that does nothing to lend any credence to their claims.

We demand evidence for everything that we believe outside of god. When people say they're in contact with extra-terrestrials, we aren't likely to merely take their word for it, we demand evidence. When someone says they have psychic powers, we demand evidence. When we hear about a radical new medical procedure, unless we're desperate and out of options, we don't

undergo it without evidence that it works. Why should the god question be any different? It shouldn't.

A common retort to the apparent lack of evidence for god's existence comes in the form of a question: "how can you prove you love someone?" This rebuttal argues that we all know love exists, but it isn't a tangible, physical thing, and there is no way to prove it scientifically, which is supposed to mean that god too can exist, even if there's no evidence. The premise of this rebuttal is false. You can demonstrate that you love someone, and it can be scientifically measured. One actions, behaviors, inflections in the voice, subtleties in facial gestures, body language, heart rate, sweat, pheromone, and hormone production, brain activity, and neurochemistry all have correlations to what we describe as "love," and these things can be precisely quantified.

Regardless, god and love are two completely different concepts. God is supposed to be a being of some sort, and love is simply an emotion. So trying to prove that can god exist without evidence, by comparing him to an emotion, suggests to me that god can only exist inside of us, in a symbolic sort, non-literal of way. The simple truth is that all claims require evidence, and in the words of Carl Sagan, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

Religion Roulette

Since we can't be one hundred percent certain that there is or isn't a god, it comes down to probability; what is more likely. A major problem for believers is the vast profusion of gods they have to choose from. There are literally thousands of gods that have been worshiped by humanity, all of which have the same amount of evidence supporting their existence (none). Why is it that so few believe in Zeus, or Poseidon, or Wotan, or Talbadak, or Karora, or Horus, Baal, Mithras, or Marduk, and yet more people believe in Yawheh (in his various forms) than in any other god? There is no more evidence for one than the other. How can it be that thousands of religions are simply lies and delusions, and the one you happen to believe in is true?

If you were born in India, odds are you'd be a Hindu. If you were born in Saudi Arabia, you'd pray to Allah. If you were born in classical Greece, you'd believe in Zeus. If you were born in ancient Scandinavia, you'd hide from Thor during lightning storms. If you were born in ancient Egypt, you'd watch the battle between Horus and Seth every time the sun rises and sets. If you were born in the Americas within the last few centuries, you'd probably believe that Jesus is the son of god. Everything you were raised to believe is an accident of when and

where you were born. If that doesn't give you pause, it should.

Even if it could be proven that some kind of deity exists, the odds of any one god existing is tantamount to spinning a giant roulette wheel with thousands of numbered panels on it, and hoping it lands on the one specific number you were hoping for. This of course assumes that the god who exists is indeed a god that humans have worshiped, as opposed to the infinite other deities that could conceivably exist. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell said, we should all hope to be damned, purely as matter of probability. To clarify, this argument does not discredit this existence of a god, but it establishes the extreme improbability of any *specific* god existing. We have thousands of different gods at hand, all of which preach different dogmas and make incompatible claims with one and other. The only thing that unites them is their universal lack of evidence. They can't all be right, but they could all be wrong.

The Superfluousness of the Supernatural

"... if God wanted to send us a message... he hardly had to confine himself to writings. Why isn't there a monster crucifix orbiting the Earth? Why isn't the surface of the Moon covered

with the Ten Commandments? Why should God be so clear in the Bible and so obscure in the world?... Where are the burning bushes, the pillars of fire, the great voice that says 'I am that I am' booming down at us out of the sky? Why should God manifest himself in such subtle and debatable ways when he can make his presence completely unambiguous?"¹¹

- Ellie Arroway in Carl Sagan's *Contact*

Over the centuries, but particularly in the last few, science has revealed to us vast amounts of knowledge about nature, life, and the universe. With every passing second, we increase our collective understanding about how the world. Supernatural explanations have never been necessary at any point in this process in order to explain anything. If there is a god, he has gone to mind-boggling lengths to cover up any traces of evidence for his own existence.

Everything we know of in the universe operates perfectly fine without the assumption that there is a god. Our understanding of geological, cosmological, astronomical, biological, and evolutionary processes and events shows that they occur by entirely natural means. Even in the areas where we don't yet have a full understanding, supernatural

explanations are always the least parsimonious options. Why hypothesize an unknown phenomenon when you can hypothesize a known one? There is a natural order to the universe. It is a system that functions without need of divine intervention. Our universe seems exactly as you'd expect it to if there were no god.

The Argument From Improbability

This is a common argument used by theists and creationists. They argue that life is far too complex to have come about on its own, and there must have been a god to get the job done. Richard Dawkins masterfully turns this argument around. We know, as a matter of fact, that complex things are statistically improbable. The chance that a complex life form - like a human being - could just form itself randomly, is tantamount to the astrophysicist Fred Hoyle's analogy of a hurricane blowing through a junkyard and assembling a Boeing 747 jet.

Anyone who understands evolution knows that complexity is born of simplicity, through countless incremental changes over vast expanses of time. Everything we know about the universe tells us that this is the way it works, and there is no evidential reason to think otherwise. The universe is extraordinarily complex. Now imagine a being capable of

commanding the universe into existence. This being would need to be unfathomably more complex than the universe. Given what we know about how complex things come to be, it makes little logical to suppose a being of (near-)infinite complexity could exist at the *beginning* a of process, rather than well into it, or most likely near the very end. A creative super-intelligence is just too complicated a being to start out with. Of course the theist can always assert that god is eternal or atemporal by whipping out their charge card of unjustifiable claims and making yet another purchase on intellectual credit. They can also turn to the cosmological argument, which Occam's razor mercilessly shreds to pieces. God is said to be infinitely complex, so let's take something simpler. The odds of a grasshopper existing at the starting point of everything, without a long, gradual process leading to itself, is so astronomical, that if you started writing zeros past the decimal point at the time of the big bang right up until now, you still wouldn't be finished. Divide that by infinity, and that's how improbable god is.

Russell's Teapot

Even after refutations of the arguments for god, and after utilizing arguments against god, many believers will say "you

still can't disprove god." This is true. God cannot be proved or disproved. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, contrived a parable that deals a devastating blow to this defense. Here is Russell in his own words, followed by Richard Dawkins' elaboration:

*"If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is an intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time."*¹²

- Bertrand Russell

"The fact that orbiting teapots and tooth fairies are undisprovable is not felt, by any reasonable person, to be the kind of fact that settles any interesting argument. None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further."

- Richard Dawkins

The God Delusion (2006)

Chapter Five:

The Theist's Trump Card

Our journey in the pursuit of truth is best undertaken with the toolkit of science, evidence, reason, logic, parsimony, and skepticism. These tools have the best track record at determining what is true, and it is with these that the theist is backed into a corner from which they can't escape... or can they?

Just when it seems that the theist has no option but to forfeit, they deploy their secret weapon, the ace up their sleeve. "God works in mysterious ways," or "God's ways are higher than ours." That is, god and his motives are beyond our comprehension. This trump card is strategically used when no other defense is available. Critics dismiss this as a cop-out that unjustly shields theists from having to answer the tough questions, such as the problem of evil. I agree, however upon further analysis, it's also a very revealing statement about theism, one that uncovers yet another logical paradox.

For the sake of argument, let's grant that god exists, and that he is far beyond our understanding. Why? Why can't we comprehend god? Well, if god created us, that means this was done intentionally. Let's analyze why this could be. God's

apparent decision to create humans without the ability to understand him seems counterintuitive to our "purpose," as theists would have us believe. People of faith, when asked what the meaning of life is, tend to have ready answers, and these usually include: to accept god into your heart, to surrender to his will, to live by his word, to please god, to fulfill his divine plan, to be godly and pious, to spread his glory and salvation, and so on. Supposing again that this is true, would it not be infinitely advantageous to both parties (us and god), if humanity had the ability to comprehend god? We would benefit from better serving our purpose of doing "right" by god, and god would benefit from having more effective and efficient devotees, which is - so say many theists - apparently why he created everything in the first place.

Perhaps he fears we might not be impressed if we saw him for what he really is? If god is the omni-everything (as believed), it stands to reason that we'd be even more impressed if we could fully perceive him, just as scientists look upon the universe with even more awe and admiration now that we know so much more about it. A being of infinite complexity, power, intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, capacity, and kindness can only be more awe-inspiring and praiseworthy the more completely it is perceived. So why create man to be so lowly? A being worthy of

the title "God," shouldn't need to put his creations at such a disadvantage.

Imagine a man who claims to be the tallest person in the world. He invites Guinness World Records to come see him and induct him into their book. However, he details very specific instructions on exactly how this meeting will take place. Any deviation from these rules will result in him leaving. They are to meet at a hilly field, on cloudless day, at noon, and he is to be standing atop a giant hill. The world records official must come alone, and is never to step within thirty feet of him, and must kneel at the foot of the hill. He is permitted only to take a photograph of the man from below with a long-lensed camera and use that as proof that he is the tallest man in world.

Obviously, this is an absurd way to go about proving such a claim, one that would convince nobody. If you were really the tallest person in the world, you wouldn't need to set up an elaborate illusion to make yourself appear high and mighty, you'd just let the records official measure you. And yet, this is more or less the scenario that god has apparently set up for us. Is he the infinitely powerful creator of the universe, or is he the "man behind the curtain," from *The Wizard of Oz*? Two possibilities seem to present themselves.

Either:

1. God is not omnipotent. God is either unable or unwilling to bestow humans with the ability to comprehend him.

If god is omnipotent, it would be child's play for him to upgrade our consciousness, senses, perception, and intelligence, and other hitherto undiscovered faculties so we could fully understand him. If he is unable to do this, then he is not all-powerful. If he is indeed omnipotent, then he is unwilling. Perhaps god is afraid we wouldn't be impressed, or that we would pose a threat, or that we would become too hard to control. In any of these cases, god would not be omnipotent.

Or:

2. God, at least the Abrahamic one, is a fictional invention of humanity.

When someone says that you can't "understand" god, we have to remember that there's more than one way not to understand something. For example, I possess neither the prerequisite education, nor aptitude for complex mathematics. If I were to attend a theoretical physics conference, I would understand very

little beyond the broad strokes. The reason I wouldn't understand is because A) I lack the foundational knowledge in the field of theoretical physics, and B) The calculations involved are too complex for me to wrap my mind around. So the source of my incomprehension would be my own lack of knowledge and intellect.

On the other hand, if I were handed a sheet of paper containing a randomly generated block of digits, characters, and symbols, it would similarly make little sense to me. In this case, however, the source of my incomprehension isn't me, but the content of this piece of paper. If I cannot understand randomly generated gibberish, it is because it *doesn't make sense*, not because I lack the capacity to make sense of it.

When we analyze the claims made by other humans or holy scriptures and find that they don't make sense, is it really that they're too complex for us to wrap our minds around, which would suggest that it is "higher" than our own minds? Or does it not simply sound like the fabrications and fancies of ancient men? I ask you.

Chapter Six:

The Liberating Embrace of Reality

"We all have a thirst for wonder. It's a deeply human quality. Science and religion are both bound up with it. What I'm saying is, you don't have to make stories up, you don't have to exaggerate. There's wonder and awe enough in the real world. Nature's a lot better at inventing wonders than we are."

- Ellie Arroway in Carl Sagan's *Contact*

When the arguments and evidence are examined carefully and dispassionately, we see that everything points to one conclusion: that there is no reasonable basis on which to believe that any gods exist. We arrive then at agnostic atheism. Agnostic, because god is undisprovable, and atheist, because we lack belief in one. Where does this leave us?

Believers often wonder - sometimes aloud - what is it that we non-believers have to fill that void left by religious faith. Time spent engaged in religious activity can be reallocated. Sense of community and camaraderie can be found elsewhere. Money previously given to religious organizations can be used

however one pleases. The false friends one loses by jettisoning their faith can be replaced with truer ones. These are legitimate concerns, but the notion of filling the void of God within oneself goes much deeper. It is one of purpose, of meaning. What is the point of life, what is the endgame? This is what lies at the heart of the question which believers and also some atheists ask.

Most of us were raised in some kind of religion or faith tradition, or at least with the belief that a god or higher power exists. The effect this can have is not unlike drug addiction. Religious faith has a parasitic way of boring into us, creating dependency, of tethering itself to our sense of self and meaning, such that without it, we feel there is something missing. Faith is the huckster that convinces you you're sick so they can sell you the "cure." It convinces us that we have a hollow, god-shaped place within. But it is not so. We are all born whole, without voids, without figurative holes in our hearts. So life is finite? That makes it *more* precious and meaningful, not less. So there is no "masterplan?" That means we can find our own purpose, our own passions, and our own drives, instead of adhering to some one-size fits all fallacy-ridden dogma. A worldview absent gods is one where we appreciate the scarcity of existence instead of looking past it

to an imaginary hereafter. It allows us to fully embrace the *journey* instead of fixating on the destination. This life is not a dress rehearsal. Understanding that means we are in a better position to *make it count!*

Faith-based thinking also inculcates in many an emotional revulsion to the notion that the universe consists of nothing more than space-time, matter, energy, and natural laws. People facetiously ask if they are "nothing but" matter, or their personhood is "just" their brain, or if the universe is "only a collection" of materials. So many people are instilled from a young age with notions of supernatural beings, mystical abilities, magical realms and the like, that they misguidedly view the reality of a material cosmos, with all its marvelous wonders, as some kind of a letdown. I find that such a shame. There are few ideas or ideals in life more driving, more beneficial, more meaningful, important, and beautiful than the search for truth. The overwhelming majority of the answers we have found and will likely find are going to be at odds with the mythologies of primitive humanity. This is not cause for despair, but for rejoicing at the beauty of reality.

On the cosmic scale, humanity has been around for the blink of an eye. We are as infants, waking in our cradles and peering out onto a complex and magnificent universe. We should all

check our privilege, not for what gender we are or the color of our skin, but because we *exist* at all. What mind-boggling sequence of events had to happen *just* the right way for you - and none other - to be reading these words at this precise moment? Maybe there is no god. Maybe there is no grand purpose. Maybe this is our only life, and with the death of our brains goes our existence. That is where the evidence points us. We owe it to ourselves to become students of *truth*. We owe it to ourselves to discover our origins, and to seek knowledge, and to figure out why we are here, and where we are going. We don't have the answers to all our questions, but the answers are out there, and it's up to us to find them. We have this one chance to understand our world, and we're in this together, you and I.

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